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Just a Girl? Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth

Cause I'm just a girl, little ol' me
 Don't let me out of your sight
 I'm just a girl, all pretty and petite
 So don't let me have any rights.
 Oh, I've had it up to here!
 —No Doubt, "I'm Just a Girl," from *Tragic Kingdom*
 (Trauma/Interscope, 1996)

Gwen is someone that girls can look up to and feel like they know.
 She is very Everygirl.
 —No Doubt bassist Tony Kanal, on the appeal
 of lead singer Gwen Stefani¹

It would have been difficult to tune in to a U.S. Top 40 radio station for very long during the summer and fall of 1996 without hearing at least one iteration of "I'm Just a Girl," the catchy breakthrough single that propelled the neo-ska band No Doubt to a position as one of the year's top-selling rock acts. "I'm Just a Girl" not only earned No Doubt commercial visibility nearly a decade (and three albums) into the group's career, it also established twenty-seven-year-old Gwen Stefani, the band's charismatic lead singer, as the latest in a series of female rock musicians to have attracted widespread commercial visibility as well as a loyal following of young female fans. Sporting her trademark bared midriff, retro-platinum hair, and conspicuously made-up face (which often includes an Indian *bindi* ornamenting her forehead), Stefani has established a reputation as a skillful and dynamic live performer who puts on energetic, no-holds-barred shows (she once danced so hard during a concert that she fractured

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¹ Quoted in Wartofsky 1997, G1.

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a foot). Stefani's performance of "I'm Just a Girl" at a 1996 Seattle concert—one variation of an act she was still performing in the summer of 1997—provides a memorable illustration. At first prostrating herself on the stage and repeating the phrase "I'm just a girl" in an infantile, whimpering voice, she then abruptly shifted gears, jumping up, railing "Fuck you, I'm a girl!" at the delighted audience (at least half of whom were young women), and exuberantly launching into the remainder of the song.²

Stefani's dramatic staging of disparate modes of femininity exemplifies her adept manipulation of rock spectacle in the tradition of female rockers such as Siouxsie Sioux, Grace Jones, Poly Styrene (of X-Ray Spex), Annie Lennox, Courtney Love, and Madonna. More significantly, her performance of "I'm Just a Girl" exemplifies a trend that since the early 1990s has gained increasing prominence within rock music cultures: female musicians' strategic performances of "girlhood" and their deliberate cultivation of various "girlish" identities in their music, style, and stage acts. The performance of girlhood by contemporary female rockers encompasses a wide range of musical and artistic practices by women within, outside of, and on the margins of the corporate mainstream: from singer-songwriter Lisa Loeb's championing of female nerdiness and cultivation of childlike vocals, to the independent Canadian band Cub's repertoire of songs about childhood, played in an offbeat, deliberately lo-fi manner, to Courtney Love's infamous "kinderwhore" costume of a torn and ill-fitting baby-doll dress and smudged red lipstick, to the phenomenal global popularity of the Spice Girls, the seemingly omnipresent all-female Brit-pop studio group that updates the manufactured glitziness of the "girl groups" of the 1960s while promoting a playful, if equivocally feminist, notion of "girl power" (Walters 1997, 69).³ Such calculated and, in Love's case, deliberately sexu-

² This description is based on an account by Jonathan Bernstein (1996, 52). In a performance in Worcester, Massachusetts, Stefani got the boys in the audience to sing "I'm just a girl" and then instructed the girls to chant "Fuck you! I'm a girl!" See Wartofsky 1997, G1.

³ I revised this article in August 1997, at the simultaneous height of Spice Girls' popularity (as signified, at least in part, by their appearance on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine) and the incipient anti-Spice Girls backlash, especially on the Internet and World Wide Web, where curious browsers can find pages with titles such as "Spice Girls Suck Club" and "Spice Shack of Blasphemy." I can add little to what has already been said and written about the Spice Girls' decidedly cynical appropriation and recirculation of girl power (the "girls" here including the late Princess of Wales and even Margaret Thatcher) as a record industry commodity. Two aspects of the Spice Girls' success story remain interesting: first, the Spice Girls phenomenon, from the start, has been accompanied by the anti-Spice Girls backlash; and second, for all that the Spice Girls represent an obviously "cosmetic" feminism evacuated of commitment to combating patriarchy, the anti-Spice Girls movement seems to have given people licence to use the group's commercial success to voice antifeminist, even misogynist,

ally provocative performances of girlish femininity draw on the mid-1980s precedents set by Madonna, especially around the time of her work in Susan Seidelman's 1985 film *Desperately Seeking Susan*, and Cindy Lauper, whose 1984 hit "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" is revised and updated in No Doubt's "I'm Just a Girl." These earlier pop-rock icons — significantly, the first women in rock to attract the kind of devoted following of young female fans usually associated with male rock stars (Lewis 1990, 10) — set the stage for performers like Stefani, who has attracted her own following of fourteen-year-old "Gwennabes" who clamor backstage at No Doubt shows hoping to get a glimpse of their idol. Following in the footsteps of their progenitors Lauper and Madonna, performers such as Stefani and Alanis Morissette have discovered in acting "like a girl" new ways of promoting the cultural visibility of women within rock music. At the same time, the music industry has discovered in these female stars (each with her own carefully cultivated star persona) new ways to sell its products to young female consumers (i.e., "real" girls).

In this article I examine contemporary female rock musicians' representations of girls, girlhood, and "girl culture" — popular cultural practices that have a corollary in the emergence of what I call "girl studies," a sub-genre of recent academic feminist scholarship that constructs girlhood as a separate, exceptional, and/or pivotal phase in female identity formation.⁴ As evidenced by "I'm Just a Girl," the song that, not incidentally, propelled Stefani to her current position as female rock icon, the performance of girlhood, although by no means a homogeneous or universal enterprise, can now be said to constitute a new cultural dominant within the musical

sentiments. Many of the anti-Spice Girls Web sites exemplify this tendency to conflate disdain for the group's musical production (i.e., disdain for musical commodities) with disdain for women, generally speaking. This latter aspect of the backlash seems particularly insidious, given the tendency to elide female subjectivity not only with consumption but with the commodity form itself.

⁴ "Girl studies" emerges not only from fields such as psychology, with its long-standing interest in human social and psychic development, but also from newer fields such as cultural studies, which has its own traditions (by way of Birmingham and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) of analyzing youth and the politics of youth subcultures (particularly working-class, predominantly male youth subcultures). The popularity and visibility of the "girl" within popular youth/music cultures, combined with renewed interest in forms of violence/trauma that primarily affect girls (e.g., incest, eating disorders, self-mutilation or "cutting"), may have had the effect of spurring academic interest in studying the specific cultural formations and cultural practices of girls. At the time when *Signs* was soliciting articles for this volume, e.g., a number of other calls for papers and/or book chapters on this topic were circulating. This article might be said to constitute my own ambivalent and critical venture into girl studies, a subject I return to later in the article.

practice of women in rock. This is particularly the case among white women “alternative” rockers, who draw on practices pioneered in the early 1990s in independent music. In this realm, female artists have ventured to celebrate girlhood as a means of fostering female youth subculture and of constructing narratives that disrupt patriarchal discourse within traditionally male rock subcultures.⁵ The “girlishness” so conspicuously on display among these contemporary women rockers demands attention, not only because it signals the emergence of new, “alternative” female rock subjectivities (revising earlier genre-specific models such as the rock chick, the singer-songwriter, or the diva), but because in so doing, it conveys various assumptions about (white) women’s visibility within popular youth/music culture, signposting the incorporation—indeed, the commercial preeminence—of ironic, postmodern modes of gender performance.

My interest in this article is neither to celebrate nor to denigrate the girl as a new modality of female rock performance but to argue that the emergence of the girl signals an important moment of contradiction within contemporary youth/music cultures. In the example offered by Stefani, the strategy of appropriating girlhood, like the word *girl* itself, signifies ambiguously: as a mode of culturally voiced resistance to patriarchal femininity; as a token of a sort of “gestural feminism” that is complicit with the trivialization, marginalization, and eroticization of women within rock music cultures; and as an expression of postmodern “gender trouble” that potentially recuperates girlhood in universalizing, ethnocentric terms. More specifically, and notwithstanding Stefani’s explicit and flippant mimicry of normative femininity, the instability of her appropriation of girlhood as an oppositional or feminist cultural strategy belies too optimistic a reading of “I’m Just a Girl.” For example, even as the song’s lyrics redefine *girl* in a rhetorical or sarcastic manner, Stefani’s girlishly feminine persona—and her very commercial popularity, tied as it is to her performance of gender—potentially furthers the notion that within patriarchal society women acquire attention, approval, and authority to the degree that they are willing to act like children.

Just as “I’m Just a Girl” plays cleverly with the codes of good girl/bad girl femininity, so Stefani’s performance is carefully calibrated to display elements of “transgressive” femininity (without abandoning the principle

⁵ “Alternative” rock is often defined in terms of an aesthetic that disavows, or evinces critical mistrust of, earlier rock subjectivities as well as the music industry itself (see Weisbard and Marks 1995, vii). And yet “alternative” is also, for my purposes, a corporate demographic and a new set of industry practices spurred by the discovery that independent labels could effectively serve as major-label artists-and-repertoire departments, according to the logic of outsourcing.

that a female rock musician's "pretty face" is the ultimate source of her commercial popularity and, therefore, cultural authority). Indeed, Stefani's performance evinces the possibility that the recuperation of girlhood may not, in and of itself, be incompatible with the relentless eroticization of women's bodies within corporate rock (a contradiction embodied in Stefani's look as a kind of punk Marilyn Monroe)—in other words, that female rockers can play at being girls, and even mock the conventions of patriarchal girlhood, while remaining sexy and/or retaining "the charm of passivity" (Beauvoir 1989, 337). The point here is not merely that girlish innocence sells records but that Stefani's sarcastic discourse of helplessness, innocent girlhood simultaneously functions as a strategy of feminism and a strategy of commerce (where feminism and commerce exist in a complex and shifting, rather than a simple and binary, relation to one another). Staged, in other words, within the very corporate institutions that are agents of dominant discourses that divest women of cultural power, Stefani's performance of infantile, girlish femininity may be symbolically, if not actually, redundant.

As an analysis of "I'm Just a Girl" elucidates, so-called transgressive gender play within contemporary rock music cultures often fronts for far less transgressive codings and recordings of racialized and nationalized identities. At its worst, that is, such recuperation of girlhood has been staged in terms that equate girlness with whiteness.⁶ For Stefani, in particular, playing with the signifiers of girlhood is tacitly a strategy of bolstering white racial authority—indeed, of bracing precisely that cultural power that authorizes her to engage in the parodic mimicry of gender norms without social penalty. In such a way, "I'm Just a Girl" accentuates Stefani's gender transgression—her position as a girl lead singer—while minimizing the visibility of another, more salient aspect of her performance—her negotiation of ska, Jamaica's first urban pop style and No Doubt's primary musical

⁶ The conclusions of this article were brought home by the commercially successful 1997 Lilith Fair concert tour, which, although touted by organizer Sarah McLachlan as a "celebration of women in music," was in fact primarily a celebration of white female singer-songwriters, notwithstanding the occasional inclusion of performers such as Tracy Chapman (e.g., at the New York City concert). The corporate and independent press made much of the Lilith Fair's demonstration that a music festival organized around "women's voices" could draw ticket sales and support a roster of appearances at medium-sized arenas throughout the United States, although very few writers ever noticed that this "Galapalooza," as *Time* (see Farley 1997, 60–61) put it, was also a universalizing recuperation of white women's music/performance as *women's* music/performance. One has only to look at *Spin* magazine's notable "Girl Issue" of November 1997 (which came out when this article was already in press) for a demonstration of how feminism—not only femininity—may be similarly recuperated as white.

influence (by way of English “Rude Boys” and 2-Toners). Indeed, Stefani’s pogo-inspired dance style and her display of raw, raucous energy are themselves hallmarks of ska performance reframed within the context of outrageous, uninhibited, and confident white female alternative rock performance. In this scenario, Stefani’s self-conscious “innocence,” “helplessness,” and “charm” are not only crucial to her critical disarticulation of girlhood from its meaning within patriarchal discourse, they also enable her to naturalize national and racial identity. In focusing attention on gender performance as a privileged site and source of political oppositionality, critical questions of national, cultural, and racial appropriation can be made to disappear under the sign of transgressive gender performance.

This instance of how a contemporary female rock icon’s appropriation of girlhood can mask other, related kinds of appropriation recalls Madonna’s appropriation of styles associated with black gay drag performance in her hit song and video “Vogue,” a song calculated to display Madonna’s own transgressive gender/sexual identity. More recently, the emergence of the “girl” as a newly privileged mode of white femininity within alternative rock coincides with the appearance of the white male “loser” (e.g., Beck, Billy Corgan of Smashing Pumpkins, and Kurt Cobain of Nirvana), whose performances of abject or disempowered masculinity work to recuperate white racial authority even as they circulate within an ostensibly self-critical performative economy of “whiteness.”⁷ Such observations necessitate a rethinking of what Coco Fusco calls “the postmodernist celebration of appropriation” (1995, 70) — at the very least, that is, an acknowledgment of the need to draw critical distinctions between the feminist refusal of patriarchal discourse and performances that circulate the signs of refusal while actually expressing complicity with patriarchal discourse. As Fusco writes, it is imperative that we “cease fetishizing the gesture of crossing as inherently transgressive, so that we can develop a language that accounts for who is crossing, and that can analyze the significance of each act” (76).⁸

Fusco’s insight is crucial for specifying and localizing the political effi-

⁷ Of late there has been a great deal written about the “loser.” For two good accounts, see Pfeil 1995 and Fuchs 1996.

⁸ There is, of course, an impressive body of scholarship that probes the notion of “appropriation” specifically within the context of U.S. popular music cultures. See, in addition to Fusco, Jones 1963; George 1988; Rogin 1992; Lipsitz 1994. For more recent discussions in the context of specific genres/performers, see Melnick 1997. As I argue in “One of the Boys? Whiteness, Gender, and Popular Music Studies” (Wald 1997), to date most of the work on appropriation within popular music cultures focuses on relations between men, a fact that calls for a gendered critique of the notion of appropriation itself.

cacy of what Ernesto Laclau terms “disarticulation-rearticulation,” or the process of symbolic struggle through which social groups reformulate dominant codes as a means of negotiating political-cultural agency (Laclau 1977). Such a practice of critical reappropriation is frequently invoked in discussions of how various subaltern populations discover a means of actively confronting and resisting marginalization in the ironic repossession of signs otherwise meant to enforce marginality. Feminist-Marxist critic Laura Kipnis, following Laclau, explains this process as one in which “raw materials can be appropriated and transformed by oppositional forces in order to express antagonisms and resistance to dominant discourses” (1993, 16). And yet it is clear in the case of Stefani’s sarcastic send-up of “girl,” a word that in the context of rock music cultures often signifies not female youthfulness but female disempowerment (i.e., patriarchal condescension toward and trivialization of women), that such disarticulation-rearticulation does little to undermine hegemonic girlhood—to approximate something more akin to Stefani’s own brash and insubordinate “Fuck you, I’m a girl!”

Fusco’s argument additionally insists on an interrogation of the links between the cultural practices of contemporary female rockers and various racially and culturally specific assumptions about girlhood. Acquiring its meaning, like the signifier *woman*, within the context of specific discursive regimes, *girlhood* is not a universal component of female experience; rather, the term implies very specific practices and discourses about female sexuality, women’s cultural-political agency, and women’s social location. Likewise, the various contemporary narratives of girlhood produced and disseminated within U.S. rock music cultures are formed within the terms of very particular struggles for social and cultural agency. Moreover, and as revealed by the contrast between the actual maturity and/or musical expertise of the performers in question and the youthfulness of their primary audiences, these struggles to specify and potentially even radicalize girlhood are inseparable from late capitalism’s desire for new, youthful markets.

What, then, is the relation between feminism and current strategies of representing girlhood within U.S. rock music cultures? Especially at the current historical juncture, notable for the advent of an artistically self-assured and cannily enterprising generation of highly visible women rock artists, can the “reversion” to girlhood work as a strategy for feminism, or for producing feminist girls? Given the contradictions embodied in Stefani’s “I’m Just a Girl,” to what degree is the appropriation of girlhood, as a strategy particularly associated with white women’s rock performance,

also a strategy of performing race—of racializing girlhood itself? How might female rock performers who occupy a different relation to hegemonic girlhood construct different narratives of girlhood?

In what follows, I investigate these questions in more detail and as they pertain to two specific groups of performers: first, the young women in independent rock known as Riot Grrrls, who in the early 1990s initiated their own ongoing “girl-style revolution,” and then later Shonen Knife and Cibo Matto, two Japanese all-female bands that have attracted small but significant U.S. followings, particularly among “indie” rock aficionados.⁹ In so doing, I rely primarily on a critical analysis of the acts, images, music, and lyrics that these women produce, as well as on the public, mediated narratives that circulate (in the print media, on the Internet and World Wide Web, in fanzines, on MTV, or in hearsay) around the music and the performers. As my opening story about Stefani suggests, the contradictions that characterize the use of the girl as a mode of cultural resistance within female rock performance are not necessarily experienced as such by the consumers of this music, who may be more or less receptive, depending on the context and the particularities of their own social locations, to the limitations (political, ideological, and even aesthetic) that such contradiction imposes on a straightforwardly celebratory narrative of such performance. From the standpoint of a certain girl consumer forbidden from using the f-word at school or at home, for example, Stefani’s profane mockery of/revelry in girlness may have an air of transgression, danger, or defiance (against parental and school authority, against gendered bourgeois standards and expectations) that is far less salient to another girl consumer (potentially of the same class, national, regional, and ethnic/racial background) more inclined to see Stefani’s performance as merely playful, without substance that would mark it as authentically transgressive. The instability of the strategic reappropriation of girlhood is mirrored and reproduced, in other words, in the very instability of the meanings that consumers construe from performers who play the girl or who attempt to signify girlness in an ironic or parodic fashion.

However, as the following discussion is meant to illustrate, the ethno-

⁹ *Independent rock*—or, more colloquially, *indie rock*—is a common term that refers not to a musical aesthetic but to the means of production of the music under discussion. Independent rock is music that is produced and marketed through independent institutions, i.e., institutions (record labels, distributors, concert venues) that are independent from the mega-corporations that dominate the global rock music industry. Recent years have seen many “indie-major” mergers reflecting a variety of corporate arrangements; in most cases, formerly independent labels exchange some part of ownership of the label for the financing, promotion, and distribution resources of a major label.

centrism that characterizes certain appropriations of girlhood is played out at the level of production, where female musicians operate within very differently racialized spheres of girlhood. While the example of Riot Grrrl raises specific questions about the relation between ideology and independent modes of cultural production, as well as about the potential instrumentality of girlhood to a feminist critique of the corporate music industry, the case of Japanese women bands illustrates how women who are marginalized by dominant narratives of race and gender (understood as mutually constitutive discourses) negotiate their own parodic or complicit counter-narratives. Insofar as media representations of Japanese women rockers recapitulate familiar stereotypes of Asian femininity, giving rise to images of Japanese female artists as ideally girlish and innocent (a portrayal that is not necessarily at odds with representations of “exotic” Asian female sexualities), these artists produce distinct narratives that deny girlhood the status of universality and that instead engage the cultural and racial specificity of hegemonic girlhood. These observations have relevance, moreover, to the ways that girlhood is recuperated—or not—within the varied musical and performance practices of African American women, including currently popular young female performers such as Da Brat, Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, and Brandy (as well as, perhaps, an earlier incarnation of the group TLC), some of whom (e.g., Brandy) have worked to project an air of girlish “innocence” in their music, videos, lyrics, and performance, others of whom (e.g., Foxy Brown) have aggressively marketed their “youthful” sexuality, sometimes by pretending to be younger than they really are.¹⁰

My argument about the ambiguous political effects of “acting like a girl”—either as a strategy for progressive, antiracist feminism or a means of fostering the careers and the creativity of young female popular musicians—is informed by my own fan/consumer practices, as well as by my status as a relatively young white female academic. The issues I discuss here are particularly germane to my own discovery, around 1992, of the loud, fast, and unapologetically “angry” music associated with the predominantly white, middle-class women in and around the Riot Grrrl movement. This musical subculture not only provided me new aural and kinesthetic pleasures, it also encouraged me to begin writing about contemporary music culture as part of my professional practice. It is therefore with an investment simultaneously political, professional, and personal

¹⁰ These women’s performances underscore the way that girlhood is both denied to, and reinterpreted within the context of, African American women, whose use of the term *girl* as a mode of address suggests a vernacular tradition of such reinterpretation/reappropriation as well.

that I approach the question of how girlhood has been appropriated and coded — not, that is, to trash some of the very music and musical practices that have afforded me pleasure but to strike a cautious and critical tone about them. Although they often are constructed as mutually exclusive in cultural studies analysis, aesthetic pleasures are indissolubly linked to ethicopolitical critique and hence to the practices inspired and mediated through such critique. This article is thus not an exercise in critiquing pleasure, but is rather a critique of the production of pleasure through gendered and racialized narratives that signify as new, transgressive, or otherwise exemplary.

I I I

Six years before Gwen Stefani and No Doubt burst onto Top 40 radio and MTV, a small group of young women musicians active in and around the punk music scenes in Washington, D.C., and Olympia, Washington, produced a two-page manifesto calling for a feminist revolution within independent rock — what they touted under the slogan “Revolution Girl-Style Now.” At the time, members of the bands Bratmobile and Bikini Kill, the independent women rockers at the forefront of this movement, coined the term *Riot Grrrl* as a means of signposting their snarling defiance of punk’s long-standing (although hardly monolithic) traditions of misogyny and homophobia, as well as racism and sexism within the corporate music industry.¹¹ Together with other women active in various punk scenes (such as the related, albeit separate, movement of lesbians in “homocore” music, including the all-female band Tribe 8), Riot Grrrls have not only consistently advocated the creation of all-female or predominantly female bands, but they have also emphasized women’s ownership of record labels and their control over cultural representation. This last goal has been fostered by myriad Riot Grrrl-affiliated or girl-positive fanzines (such as *Girl Germs* and *Riot Grrrl*), inexpensively produced publications that circulate through feminist bookstores, independent music retailers, networks of friends, and word-of-mouth subscriptions and that explicitly envision women’s fan activity as a legitimate and authentic form of cultural production.

For the young, predominantly middle-class white women who have participated in Riot Grrrl subculture, reveling in “girliness” constitutes an aesthetic and political response to dominant representations of female sexuality produced by the corporate music industry as well as a strategy of

¹¹ For an account of the emergence of Riot Grrrl as a movement of young women within U.S. independent rock music, and for a more detailed description of the musical practices associated with Riot Grrrl, see Gottlieb and Wald 1994.

realizing women's agency as cultural producers within independent rock. By highlighting girl themes in their music, lyrics, dress, iconography, zines, and the like, performers such as Cub, Tiger Trap, Heavens to Betsy, and Bikini Kill have attempted to produce a representational space for female rock performers that is, in effect, off-limits to patriarchal authority, in a manner akin to the way that girls' clubs are off-limits to boys. Such an emphasis on girliness has enabled these women performers to preempt the sexually objectifying gaze of corporate rock culture, which tends to market women's sexual desirability at the expense of promoting their music or their legitimacy as artists. Riot Grrrls' emphasis on forms of girl solidarity has important practical implications as well. For example, Riot Grrrl advocacy of all-women or predominantly women bands originates not in a belief in the aesthetic superiority or in the "authentic" oppositionality of such groups but in the practical recognition that rock ideology (e.g., the equation of rock guitar playing with phallic mastery) has dissuaded many young women from learning to play "male" instruments. Similarly, although it was widely derided by male punk rock aficionados as "separatist," the Riot Grrrl practice of reserving the mosh pit (the area directly in front of the stage) for girls stemmed from a desire to rethink the social organization of space within rock clubs and other music venues.

A look at one aspect of Riot Grrrl artistic practice—the carefully designed sleeves of seven-inch records—reveals that for these women in indie rock, resistance to patriarchal discourse takes the form of a rearticulation of girlhood that emphasizes play, fun, innocence, and girl solidarity. The silk-screened sleeve of a 1993 Bratmobile/Tiger Trap split seven-inch (i.e., a seven-inch record that includes one track from one band on each side) on the San Francisco-based label Four-Letter Words features the image of a smiling girl doing a handstand (taken from a Kotex tampon advertisement ca. 1968; fig. 1), while a Bratmobile/Heavens to Betsy seven-inch released at about the same time features a photograph of the bared torsos of two young women wearing hip-hugger jeans and tank tops, each sporting the name of a band on her stomach. Many of the images on Riot Grrrl fanzines and record sleeves use childhood photographs of band members to similar effect, as on the sleeve of the 1994 *Babies and Bunnies* seven-inch record by the Frumpies (fig. 2), a Riot Grrrl group combining members of Bikini Kill and Bratmobile recording on the Olympia-based Kill Rock Stars label. The cover of a 1993 Cub seven-inch titled *Hot Dog Day* (Mint Records) intimates themes of girl solidarity and budding queer sexuality by picturing a silver necklace dangling a charm that depicts two smiling girl figures holding hands (fig. 3).

The relentless cuteness of these representations, which might be merely

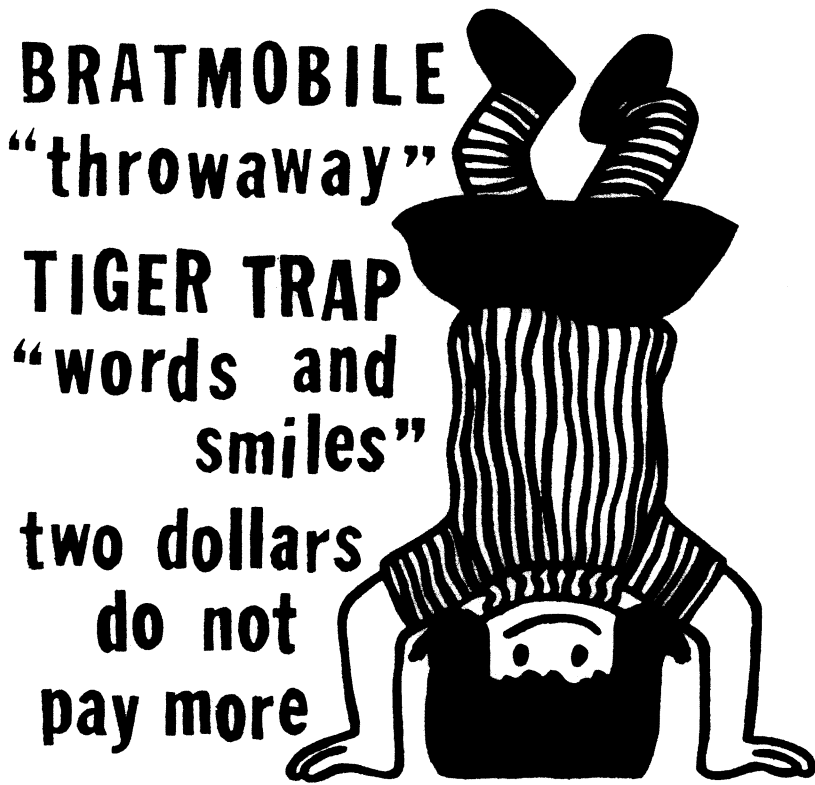


Figure 1 Sleeve, Bratmobile, “Throwaway”/Tiger Trap, “Words and Smiles,” Four-Letter Words, 1993.

sentimentalizing or idealizing under other circumstances, signifies ironically within the context of punk youth music subcultures, where “youth” is more likely to be associated with aggression, violence, and crisis, and where youth and youthfulness are frequently conflated with boyhood. Similarly, while nostalgia for an imagined past might be merely reactionary in another context (e.g., in debates over multiculturalism and in the much-touted claim that Americans have forsaken a previous commitment to civic virtue), in the context of Riot Grrrl performance these images of playful and happy girlhood are attempts at self-consciously idealizing representation. Such a recuperative iconography of girlhood contrasts—markedly, in some cases—with the music itself, which regularly explores themes of incest, the violence of heteronormative beauty culture, and the patriarchal infantilization and sexualization of girls: in short, themes that conjure not a lost innocence, a fall from childhood grace, but an innocence that was not

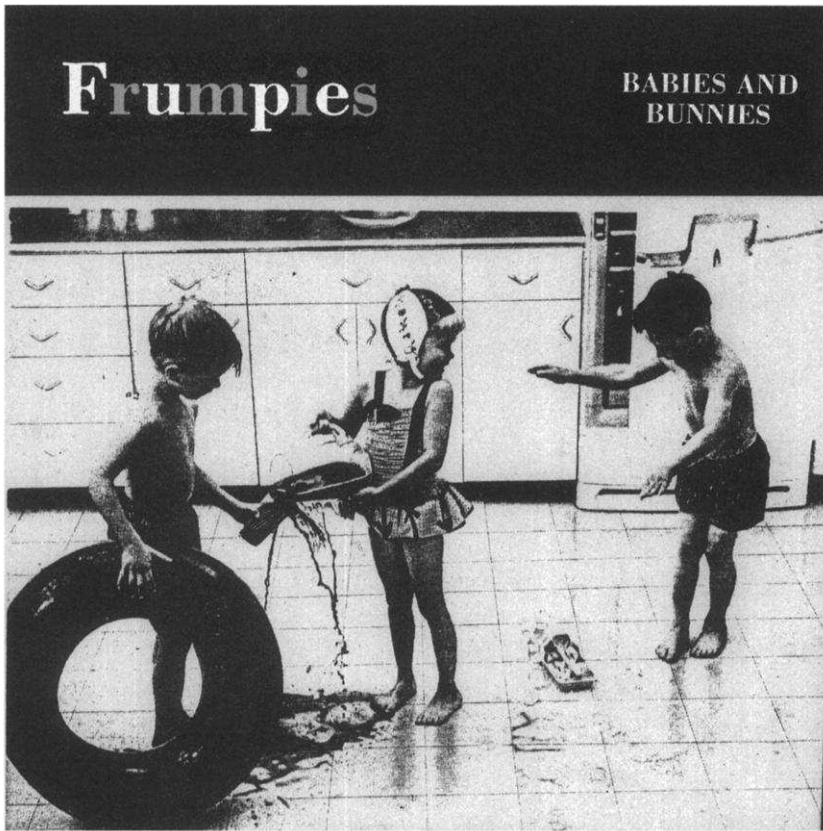


Figure 2 Sleeve, Frumpies, *Babies and Bunnies*, Kill Rock Stars, 1994

owned or enjoyed, a grace that was denied.¹² The performance of nostalgia complicates and extends the Riot Grrrl performance of righteous outrage at patriarchal abuse, in other words, invoking a yearned-for innocence and lightheartedness that retroactively rewrite the script of childhood.

Yet such idealized representations of girlhood, while undeniably pleasurable and therapeutic, are of uncertain practical or strategic value as a feminist realpolitik, particularly outside the context of popular youth/music culture. At the very least, the nostalgia that characterizes many of these representations lends itself to the production of problematically dystopian, or postlapsarian, narratives of adult female sexualities. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of this nostalgic appropriation of (imagined) girlhood is that it primarily responds to the music industry's infantilizing representation of

¹² For specific examples, see Gottlieb and Wald 1994.

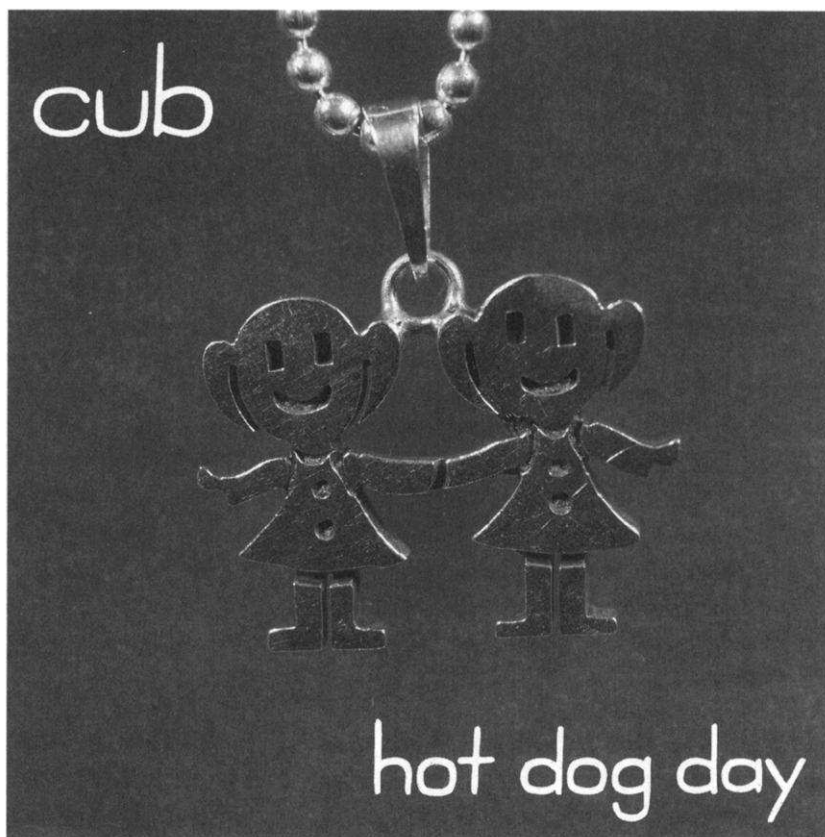


Figure 3 Sleeve, Cub, *Hot Dog Day*, Hot Dog Day, 1993

adult female sexuality, as well as to rock music's particular legacy of imagining women's contributions in sexual terms (e.g., women as groupies, sexual sideshows, rock chicks, or boy toys; McRobbie 1991, 25). It is telling, for example, that media coverage of Riot Grrrl—which reached its peak virtually simultaneously with the music, around 1992 or 1993—focused primarily on the display of anger, “fallenness,” or aggressivity rather than cuteness, innocence, or girlish passivity, not only because the Riot Grrrl name itself emphasized girlhood “with an angry ‘grrrowl,’” as the *New York Times* put it, but also because these were already familiar tropes from an earlier incarnation of punk music in the 1970s.¹³ The strategic reversion to girlhood not only rests on an ability to imagine girlhood outside of patriarchal representation, it also presumes cultural entitlement to “womanly” subjectivity.

¹³ See Japenga 1992, 30.



Riot Grrrls' self-conscious performance of nostalgia underscores the culturally constructed nature of women's and girls' access to the public sphere. Such an observation, as I have already suggested, has important implications for the transportability, across socially determined lines of difference, of the Riot Grrrl strategy of reappropriating girlhood to construct alternative (i.e., nonpatriarchal) modes of visibility for women in independent rock. In short, such a deliberate performance assumes a subject for whom girlishness precludes, or is in conflict with, cultural agency. But what of women whose modes of access to, and mobility within, the public sphere depend on their supposed embodiment of a girlish ideal?

The examples of the Osaka-based trio Shonen Knife and the New York-based duo Cibo Matto, Japanese female bands that have attracted small but significant followings among U.S. indie rock audiences, provide telling illustrations of the manner in which Asian women, whose visibility within U.S. culture is often predicated on their acquiescence to orientalist stereotypes, have had to negotiate the terrain of U.S. youth and music cultures differently than have their (primarily white) Riot Grrrl counterparts. In the United States, where Japanese rock musicians (whose music has become increasingly visible since the mid-1980s) are often regarded with a mixture of "sincere" musical interest and objectifying, ethnocentric curiosity, the recurring portrayal of Japanese women bands as interesting novelty acts, cartoonish amateurs, and/or embodiments of Western patriarchal fantasies of "cute" Asian femininity presents particular challenges for understanding how evocations of girlhood overlap with discourses of race, gender, and nation in U.S. popular music culture. In contrast to Riot Grrrl bands, whose reappropriations of girlhood are part of a broader effort to harness rock's oppositional energy for feminist critique, Japanese women rockers have had to negotiate a feminist cultural politics from within the context of Western patriarchal discourses that insist on positioning them as the exotic representatives of an idealized girlish femininity.

A look at the portrayal of Shonen Knife in the independent and corporate music media illustrates this point. Formed by two sisters, Naoko and Atsuko Yamano, and their friend and schoolmate Michie Nakatani, Shonen Knife was unknown in the United States until 1985, when the Olympia-based K Records (also known for promoting Riot Grrrl work) released *Burning Farm*, previously a Japanese recording, on cassette.¹⁴ Two

¹⁴ According to indie rock lore, the band was first "discovered" by Calvin Johnson, member of the lo-fi, punk minimalist band Beat Happening, cofounder of the K record label, and promoter of the idea of an "International Pop Underground."

independent releases, *Pretty Little Baka Guy/Live in Japan* (Gasatanka/Rockville 1990) and *Shonen Knife* (Gasatanka/Giant 1990) followed, but it was not until the band's 1992 major-label debut, *Let's Knife* (Virgin), featuring the remakes of earlier songs, some recorded for the first time in English, that Shonen Knife won significant airplay on college radio and a coveted opportunity to accompany Nirvana on tour. The immediate, enthusiastic embrace of Shonen Knife in the mid-1980s by indie rock luminaries such as Kim Gordon and Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth is often explained in terms of the band's kitschy punk-pop sound and its trademark parodic "twisting" of icons of American and Japanese commodity culture. Named for a brand of pocket knives (perhaps as a way of encapsulating a succinct critique of patriarchal masculinity?), Shonen Knife readily appealed to U.S. indie rockers, who admired the band's pomo way of blurring the boundaries between advertising jingles and "serious" punk-pop (a practice evident in songs such as "Tortoise Brand Pot Cleaner's Theme").

Despite such affinities, the women in Shonen Knife have repeatedly been portrayed in exoticizing and infantilizing terms, as demonstrated by the liner notes to a late-1980s indie rock tribute album of Shonen Knife covers, titled *Every Band Has a Shonen Knife Who Loves Them* (in ironic reference to an album of Yoko Ono covers, despite the fact that Shonen Knife had no apparent connection to the most famous of all Japanese women rock artists in the United States). Here, band members are described in frankly patronizing language: "They are happy people and love what they are doing. . . . They are humble, kind people who do not realize that they are the most important band of our time" (Weisbard and Marks 1995, 355). Variations on this basic theme abound in later representations, where the band is often cited for sporting "cute" accents—a "lite" version of the more overt and aggressive racism of an infamous *Esquire* magazine article about Ono titled "John Rennon's Excrusive Groupie" (Gaar 1992, 231). "Mostly [Shonen Knife] sing in their native tongue," writes *Rolling Stone*, "but what needs no translation is how their awkward humility mixes with their irrepressible vivacity" (Eddy 1990, 91). The band fares no better in *Melody Maker*, where they are described as the "orient's answer to the Shangri-las"—a phrase that tellingly conjures nostalgia for the manufactured sexual innocence of Phil Spector-managed 1960-era girl groups (True 1991, 38–39). One music journalist, in a description that conflates infantilizing images of Asian women's sexuality with stereotypes of female musical incompetence, has asserted that the band's fans like Shonen Knife because "they're little, lots of fun and can't really play" (Stud Brother 1992, 6). Most tellingly, perhaps, in publicity materials for their 1993 album *Rock Animals*, Virgin Records (which in 1996 released, with very little fanfare,

an album of “rarities, curiosities and live tracks” titled *The Birds and the B-Sides*) explicitly distinguishes Shonen Knife’s “simplicity,” “charismatic innocence,” and musical charm from the restive, confrontational femininity of their U.S. indie rock counterparts. These “Ronettes-meet-the-Ramones,” gushes the press release, “are definitely not cut from the same battered cloth as their Riot Grrrl and flannel shirted colleagues.”

Such a binary opposition pitting Shonen Knife, a charming and adorable Japanese novelty act with musical roots in the classic 1960s girl groups, against unfeminine, unkempt Riot Grrrls provides insight into the work performed by racialized representations of Asian femininity, as well as the specificity of the Riot Grrrl reappropriation of girlhood. For example, because she was widely perceived as having “stolen” John Lennon from his first wife, Cynthia Lennon, and perhaps because of her affiliation with the highly cerebral New York-based avant-garde and noise-rock scenes, Yoko Ono was subjected to a very different set of images: masculinized and desexualized, cast (along with her music) as impenetrable and inscrutable, intimidating and unpredictable, she was portrayed in a manner that recalls earlier, World War II-era stereotypes. By contrast, the major-label marketing of Japanese women bands such as Shonen Knife and Cibo Matto emphasizes girlishness as a way of establishing that these performers will be “fun”—that is, amusing, clever, and entertaining—for U.S. consumers.¹⁵

While Riot Grrrls have been able to reappropriate girlhood as a part of their political and musical practice, Japanese women bands have had to negotiate an unreconstructed, unironic version of the term *girl* that circulates within U.S. discourses of Asian femininity. As the above examples make plain, the media representations of Shonen Knife (and, more recently, of Cibo Matto) have tended to reinscribe their lack of cultural agency rather than explore their artistic practices as a potential source of such agency. In fact, however, both Shonen Knife and Cibo Matto have produced feminist work that counters dominant notions of a priori girlish Asian femininity, revealing how these notions are shot through with racialized sexism. For example, Shonen Knife’s “Twist Barbie” (*Shonen Knife*,

¹⁵ Such infantilizing images of Japanese women rockers are, of course, merely the benign complement to a more overtly and aggressively racist neocolonial portraiture of Asian femininity. The most flagrant example of this sort of representation comes from an “All-Japan” issue of the punk zine *Maximumrocknroll*—an issue ostensibly devoted to defining a shared political-cultural sensibility among U.S. and Japanese indie rockers. In this piece, a regular contributor muses about “nubile Nipponese lovelies” and “all these hot-looking Japanese girl bands” (Shonen Knife gets specific mention), while speculating that as a “species,” “Oriental girls” (and here he includes Asian American women) have “Mongolian eyelids” that resemble vulva, and that this explains “the source of their attractiveness.” See *Maximumrocknroll* 1994.

Gasatanka/Giant, 1990), an upbeat pop-rock song that is probably their best-known work among U.S. audiences, articulates an ambiguous relation to European ideals of femininity through the image of a Barbie doll: "Blue eyes, blond hair / Tight body, long legs / She's very smart / She can dance well. . . . O, sexy girl!" This initially humorous parody of Barbie as a miniature and synthetic "embodiment" of ideal European womanhood (a parody that imputes stereotypes of girlish femininity to U.S. white women) is punctuated, later in the song, by the phrase "I wanna be Twist Barbie" — words that potentially express a more ambiguous relation to Western beauty culture and that cleverly play off of the notion of the "wannabe," a means by which young women articulate their subjectivity through their consumption of popular culture. "Twist Barbie" is noteworthy, too, insofar as it expresses U.S.-Japanese trade relations through the figure of a doll marketed to girls. The trope of a toy is perhaps not incidental, since Shonen Knife themselves are imaginatively "toying" with Barbie as a twisted and impossible ideal of (Western) femininity — the word *twist* here referring both to a popular dance and to the band's own cultural practice, which twists the signs of Western commodity culture. "Twist Barbie" — perhaps a reference to the Twist N Turn series of Barbie dolls — conjures a specific mode of girls' leisure within U.S. commodity culture (the activity of playing with Barbie dolls) to critique a culturally specific expression of patriarchal femininity. The song suggests that women can toy with ideals of femininity themselves as artificial (i.e., as unnatural or nonessential) as the Barbie doll.

This is not to say that a song such as "Twist Barbie" cannot also abet U.S. stereotypes of "cute" or "innocent" Asian femininity: indeed, the deadpan enthusiasm with which Shonen Knife play and sing "Twist Barbie," on record and in live performance, suggests that they are less critical of a European, Barbie-type ideal than an analysis of their lyrics might imply. The balance of *Shonen Knife* (the 1990 U.S. release that features the first of several English-language versions of "Twist Barbie") is taken up with songs that, in English translation at least, seem to toe the line between parody and complicity. The album's cover art contributes photographs that support this reading of a fundamental ambivalence in Shonen Knife's self-representation: one features what looks like a snapshot of the band members taken when they were schoolgirls, and a second depicts the trio primping for the camera, wearing white dresses festooned with small multicolored bows (figs. 4 and 5). (The only element that distinguishes this second photograph is its backdrop: a graffiti-filled wall hints that the photograph may have been taken backstage at a show.)

The title and the cover art of *Viva! La Woman*, Cibo Matto's critically

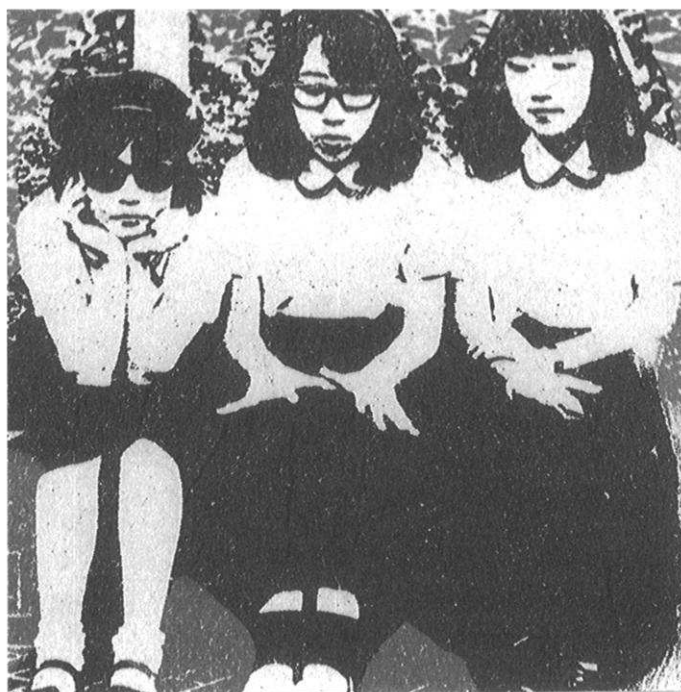


Figure 4 Cover (insert), *Shonen Knife*, *Shonen Knife*, Gasatanka/Giant, 1990



Figure 5 Cover (back), *Shonen Knife*, *Shonen Knife*, Gasatanka/Giant, 1990

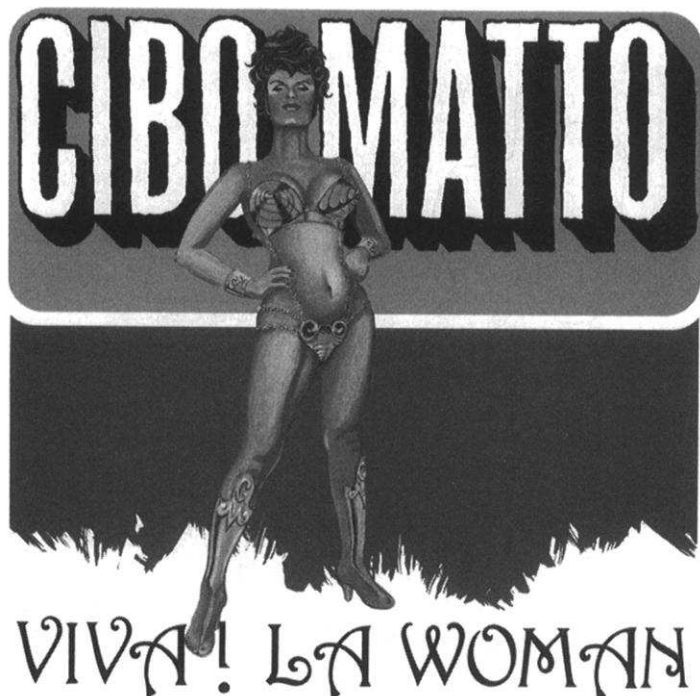


Figure 6 Cover, Cibo Matto, *Viva! La Woman*, Warner Brothers, 1996

acclaimed 1996 debut album on the Warner Brothers label, illustrate how musicians Yuka Honda and Miho Hatori (who first met in Manhattan) frame their cultural-political agency quite differently (fig. 6). Musically, there is little that connects Shonen Knife's straightforward pop-rock with Cibo Matto's intricate sound, which relies heavily on sampling technologies to produce what one critic describes as "an enticing cross-cultural fusion that mixes bossa nova, hip-hop, jazz, African drumming and disco . . . over which Hatori gleefully chants, screams, wails and raps in English, French and Japanese" (Silberger 1996, 61). As their name (Italian for "crazy food") suggests, hybridity is a central theme of Cibo Matto's artistic practice — not only the hybridity that originates in the global circulation of popular youth/music culture, but the hybridity that marks Honda's and Hatori's own "hybrid" locations as Japanese-born New Yorkers whose music draws inspiration from white artists' interpretations of African American hip-hop. The duo fosters an image of cosmopolitan sophistication that is distinct from Shonen Knife's (calculated?) image of playful, good-girl simplicity. Such a notion is reinforced by the Dada quality of the duo's lyrics and the cool, technologically hip image they project in live perfor-



Figure 7 Cover (inside photograph), Cibo Matto, *Viva! La Woman*, Warner Brothers, 1996.

mance, during which Honda nonchalantly inserts floppy disks into a computer synthesizer while Hatori sings.

A band photograph from *Viva! La Woman* (fig. 7) depicts the musicians as denizens of a high-tech playground: dressed in sequins, Honda (posed on a bicycle) and Hatori appear surrounded by turntables, tape recorders, synthesizers, musical instruments, and, most conspicuously, skateboards, while various other figures (producers? engineers?) busy themselves in the background. As such an image implies, sampling and dubbing technologies, as well as synthesizers that filter and/or distort Hatori's "natural" vocals, afford Cibo Matto a variegated and intricate musical "voice." Cultural agency, for these women performers, is not staged primarily within the terms of the paradigm offered by U.S. Riot Grrrls, or even within the ambiguously complicit/parodic economy of signification modeled by Shonen Knife. Rather, they demonstrate how the appropriation of girlhood may at times conflict with women's cultural agency.

I I I

In their 1995 book *The Sex Revolts*, Simon Reynolds and Joy Press claim that U.S. alternative rock, increasingly focused on "gender tourism" as a

source of its rebellion and therefore its identity formation, has witnessed a corresponding decline in the significance of race to its musical and cultural practice. (Although I am appropriating Reynolds and Press's language here, I want to distance myself from their use of the phrase *rock rebellion*, a term that is not only potentially condescending but also explicitly masculinist.) According to *The Sex Revolts*, the emergence of "alternative" music (actually a fully corporatized style that is, by and large, an object of derision for indie rockers) in the early 1980s is pivotal, marking the end of an era during which black sources served as the primary inspiration for white cultural innovation and heralding a new era in which the performance of gender, not race, is paramount. If rock cultures were once conceived as, alternatively, a meeting place and a battleground between black and white identities—a cultural sphere where white and black youths violated social taboos against "race mixing" and where white youths fashioned dissident identities according to the models offered by black musicians and black musical culture—these cultures are nowadays more concerned, as Reynolds and Press argue, with the production of new gendered subjectivities that are less apparently marked by dominant discourses of race (385–86).

My own analysis of the representation of Shonen Knife and Cibo Matto belies this relatively simplistic thesis, which in turn reveals the inevitable interarticulation of racism and sexism. Here, too, I want to register the disturbing resonance of the phrase *gender tourism* in Reynolds and Press's text with *sex tourism*, and to note that while it implies the fluidity of gender identifications in rock performance, the term *gender tourism* in this context actually reinscribes the stability of gender in explicitly neocolonial terms, where (white) men are the explorers, (Japanese) women the colony to be explored. The analogy is not too far-fetched, given the argument I have been developing about the cultural construction of girlhood and girl culture within rock music. Indeed, one of the points of my analysis of contemporary rock cultures has been to show that "girlhood," far from signifying a universal, biologically grounded condition of female experience, instead implies a relation to agency, visibility, and history that emerges within a particular discursive context. The different counternarratives of girlhood produced by a Riot Grrrl band such as Bikini Kill and a Japanese band such as Shonen Knife occupy different antagonistic relations to hegemonic girlhood, whose meaning is itself unstable. The fact that these different narratives take root in very different cultural contexts suggests that one cannot assume the portability of contemporary white U.S. women rockers' critical discourse of girlhood and their advocacy of girl culture.

By way of concluding, then, I want to explore some implications of these themes outside of the specific context of rock music. An anecdote

about my own relation to work on girl culture provides a starting point. This article was inadvertently inspired by a presentation about Riot Grrrls that I gave as part of an academic job talk at New York University several years ago. At the end of my talk, one audience member asked me whether such work on female youth/music culture—and perhaps here he was also implicitly referencing my advocacy of Riot Grrrl as a noteworthy development within punk and postpunk musics—tacitly shifted the emphasis of, or even supplanted, women's studies (and the various critiques integral to its practical interventions within the academy) with something he provocatively termed “girl studies.” My answer at the time was something like, “What's wrong with girl studies?”—a response that was calculated (inasmuch as I had time to calculate) to legitimize girls and their specific cultural formations (something integral to the Riot Grrrl project) as well as to authorize my own work on girls/grrrls. I admit, too, that as a candidate performing in front of various tenured faculty and curious graduate students, I felt at that moment like something of a girl. I argued then, as I would now, that research into the discourses of girlhood is crucial if we want to understand how contemporary female performers and their audiences have attempted to create avenues of feminist agency within traditionally masculinist popular forms.

I could not then anticipate how resonant this brief and admittedly superficial exchange about the status of “girl studies” would later seem in light of the emergence both of a popular psychological literature of girlhood (which depicts girlhood as a period of crisis in female subjectivity) and of a burgeoning academic subfield of the cultural studies of girls. My own reading of Shonen Knife's playful mimicry of a Barbie-esque ideal of femininity is in tacit dialogue with recent feminist studies that use Barbie as an important cultural text. In such work, Barbie bears the inscription of various overlapping and sometimes contradictory ideologies of race, gender, class, and nation.¹⁶ The “new Barbie studies,” particularly when undertaken from queer feminist perspectives, uses this most ubiquitous and notorious symbol of ideal femininity to explore and critique girls' appropriations of patriarchal commodity culture, suggesting that such appropriations may be important to their identity formation. This article represents my own analogous reading of young women rock musicians' feminist appropriations of hegemonic girlhood, based on the related notion that youth music provides an important cultural venue for the articulation and rearticulation of youthful subjectivities.

And yet some of the limitations of this intellectual project, if not of the

¹⁶ See, e.g., Ebersole and Peabody 1993; Lord 1994; Rand 1995. New studies of Barbie are also forthcoming.

very notion that girlhood can be unproblematically reclaimed for feminism or for feminist cultural practices, are also implicit in this reading of the cultural construction of girlhood within rock music. It is noteworthy that “I’m Just a Girl” peaked in popularity at about the same time that Madonna and Courtney Love, two of the female rock performers most associated with the cultural subversion of girlhood, chose to “grow up,” at least in terms of their public performance of gender: Madonna through her very public staging of motherhood and her role as Evita in the film version of the famous Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, Love through a starring role in the movie *The People vs. Larry Flynt* (Forman 1996) and a highly publicized beauty/fashion makeover. There is something predictably depressing, too, about the global popularity of the Spice Girls, who have appropriated the spunky defiance associated with English Riot Grrrls in a patently opportunistic fashion. Particularly within the context of the global struggle for women’s rights, it is clear that girlhood cannot yet be spoken of as a universal right or property of women. Moreover, even work that eschews girlhood as the universalizing complement of very particular constructions of human biological development can end up essentializing girlhood as a necessary phase within the life cycle imagined by global capitalism. Rock music cultures, especially the cultures of independent rock, provide crucial sites within which young women can negotiate their own representations of girlhood in varying degrees of opposition to, or collaboration with, hegemonic narratives. As the foregoing analysis of various contemporary female rockers suggests, however, women—especially those who benefit from their privileged national, racial, or economic status—will need to stay alert to the necessity of interrogating, in an ongoing and self-critical fashion, the conditions that govern their access to social and cultural agency. If I am sounding a note of particular urgency, it is because I believe that youth music cultures continue to offer girls important sources of emotional sanctuary and vital outlets for the expression of rage and pleasure, frustration and hope.

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